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ABSTRACT

Poststructural theory grapples with the hiddenness and complexity of oppression by questioning Western understandings of the self as a unitary, self-created, autonomous, essentialist entity. Feminist psychologists have shown that autonomy as a measure of maturity implies that women will never "grow up" because women's lives tend to be anchored in webs of relationships. In deconstructing the traditional model of self, poststructuralism suggests that selfhood is defined by social forces expressed in discourse. With the old model of self, expressive writing was about discovering the essential self. According to a poststructuralist model, expressive writing may be seen more as an examination of oneself in relation to social discourses. For students in an open admissions setting, even an elementary sort of academic discourse is a long-range goal rather than a present condition. The narrative of a high school drop-out reveals the process of his developing a new relationship toward a history of academic failure which he had previously internalized. The narrative of a young mother married to a drug addict discloses the process of her realization that the happy-ever-after fairy tales which led her to see her husband as a prince regardless of his behavior are deceptive models of married life. For these students, writing is a way of rehearsing new subject positions. It is the writing instructor's task to help students discover the possibility of challenge and resistance writing can provide. (Portion of student essay attached.) (SAM)

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# Rehearsing New Subject Positions: A Poststructural Look at Expressive Writing

I do not care much for the language of poststructuralism, for I resist on principle language that seems purposely exclusionary. In an open admissions setting, I work with students for whom even an elementary sort of academic discourse is a long range goal rather than a present condition. I particularly enjoy what we call developmental classes because so much can happen in a few short months -- to people and to the way they put words on paper. I labor to bring into our academic world folks (both young and old) who have often found it a not very comfortable place to be. They have felt closed out and have suffered pain in earlier experiences of school. They have been oppressed by an educational process that claims to offer options: If you do good in school, you can be somebody. That's what we say. But there's some covert stuff going on in the context of school that makes our words a lie. This is why I like poststructural theory: because it grapples with the hiddenness and complexity of oppression.

One of the many mechanisms which sustain oppression in Western society has been our commonsense understanding of the self -- as a unitary something, apparently centered in the mind, self-contained, if you will, and self-created, autonomous, fixed

by early experiences (or even perhaps by inheritance) and thereafter essentially unchangeable. How this traditional (or Cartesian) view of the self operates to sustain oppression may be seen, for example, in the generally accepted idea from psychology that autonomy is a meaningful measure of maturity: you grow up by learning to stand on your own two feet. Feminist psychologists have shown that autonomy as a measure of maturity implies that women will never in fact "grow up" because of the way in which women's lives tend to be anchored in webs of relationships. Because women often are deeply involved in the lives of other people, they are never fully mature if maturity requires separation and self-centered independence.

If the traditional model of self is taken to define the "normal," then to see the self in any other way means feeling abnormal, "pathologized" as some poststructural writers say. In work which examined closely the lives of several young single mothers, I found that all were explicitly struggling with a sense of being not normal because they knew themselves to be not a single person but many -- a collage of selves shaped by and for different relationships in their lives. They knew themselves to be variously "positioned" (as poststructuralists say) by the way that power shifted from one relationship to another and even within a single relationship.

These were not women who had studied psychological theory; they would not overtly define what the self "should" be. But a discourse of self operated for them and on them somehow to let

them know that in their sense of a complex self they were different from the norm. In school this feeling of alienation or isolation in an "abnormal" sense of the self may be particularly poignant where there is racial or ethnic (and/or class) difference from the "norm." When the women I have worked with describe themselves as Puerto Rican-American, they are talking about two distinct aspects of the self and about a struggle that often feels like being the rope in a tug-of-war. Two sets of connections, two sets of real people, two sets of those mysterious prescriptive discourses which poststructuralists say have such enormous influence in shaping who we are. School frequently exacerbates the pain and struggle, the sense of being split apart, because succeeding in school all too often requires burying one part of the self. There may be no openly racist (or classist) decree, but you know...you know. The refrain is there even sometimes behind language about empowerment: you're not good enough -- maybe you could be, but you must first disavow a part of who you are.

The traditional model of the self then leaves out -- or rather closes out -- whole groups of people for whom it simply does not work. And it oppresses whole groups of people by the way in which they internalize a notion of inadequacy and difference. What is the alternative? Doesn't poststructuralism take away the idea of self entirely when it deconstructs the traditional model? I think not. Rather, poststructuralism redefines the self, suggesting that who-I-am is constructed to a

large extent by social forces, by the effects of discourses -- which are the languages that surround us in multiple layers to direct and shape us. Who-I-am has a lot to do with what I hear from other people and with how I am "positioned" by the power that echoes in their voices. But I am not myself without power, for language is full of little holes into which I can insert my will. As Susan Hekman puts it, in good poststructuralese: "the gaps and ambiguities within the interstices of language...prevent a uniform determination of subjectivity." If the self is largely constituted by language, then using language, being creative with language, is a significant tool in exerting agency or choice about who-we-are. My language can interact with discourse prescriptions to reshape them, challenge their authority, give them different meanings. I can in fact invent alternative discourses, ways of speaking that subvert the dominant definition of who I'm supposed to be. As Wendy Hollway points out, such invention is ideally, perhaps necessarily, a community event; there needs to be listening and response, for alternative discourses are something "we produce together."

With the old model of self, expressive writing was about discovering the something that is, irrevocably and for all time, ME. It involved a kind of "rolling about in the self," to adapt Montaigne's phrase, a self firmly bounded and essentially closed to outside influence. Because the poststructural redefinition of self blurs the separation between self and what is outside, expressive writing may be seen more as an examination of where I

am in relation to the forces which touch me through the language and behavior of those around me. It may be about discovering the position in which I find myself, how I got here and who's in charge, and it may become then a means for rehearsing new positions by testing out language that can be instrumental in changing who-I-am. If self is process, not static but constantly shifting and developing, if we think of self as a gathering and growing discursive history, then writing may play a major role in its definition, as the site for reflectively getting out there this moment's configuration of who-I-am.

Chris Weedon talks about the possibility of "transform[ing] the meaning of experience [-- and so changing our history and our subjectivity --] by bringing a different set of assumptions to bear on it." That is what I see happening in two stories about student writing I want to tell. For the first, I don't have the actual paper, only a recollection, but I want to tell the story because it is explicitly about academic positioning. Bill was a young man in his mid-20's in my "Fundamentals of Writing" class several years ago. Back in school after a long absence, at one point during the semester he wrote to share with me and with his classmates a detailed account of his painful academic history. He remembered specific incidents in every year of school from kindergarten through ninth grade, when he had finally dropped out, which had told him over and over again that he could not learn, that he wasn't good enough, that he would never amount to anything.

As he told his story from paragraph to paragraph, he was indeed bringing a different set of assumptions to bear on his experience -- because now he was determined that somehow he would make it, in spite of THEM, those teachers who had found him so stupid and troublesome. He was casting them into a different role -- as the bad guys -- and in the process he was taking away their power over him that had so long held him pinned against the wall of academic failure. He didn't change the story of what had happened, but he was practicing a new relationship to his personal history, transforming its meaning.

I do not mean to say that writing makes it so, that his declaration of determination would enable him this time to hold the course in school and get where he wanted to go. But I insist that rehearsing is useful and important, perhaps even a necessary first step to reclaiming what has been taken away, to undoing in this case a particular kind of academic oppression.

The second story is less directly or obviously related to academic endeavor, but I will argue that the writer is doing important academic work. I know Marie better than I knew Bill. She was one of the "case studies" for my dissertation; she is a collaborator and a friend. Marie dropped out of school after ninth grade. In junior high, she had felt very afraid and alone. Further, she did not see any point to school because she knew what she wanted in life: she wanted to be a wife. Her view of her future was borrowed from antique fairy tales, the traditional dream of happily ever after, what Valerie Walkerdine has called

"the fiction of the prince." The irony of her dream of course was that the guy she was hooked up with, Jose, was a most unlikely prince. When I first met her, he was in jail for the second time for drug dealing. His situation did not then dim her rosy view, however; she had just brought his little girl into the world, her second child, and he was "getting better" in jail, detoxing, working on his GED, and, when she visited him, he encouraged her dream of togetherness.

By the time Marie wrote the piece called "Life with an Addict" she had spent two summers in an explicitly feminist program for young single mothers that I had going for a while on the campus of Mount Holyoke College. She had done a lot of thinking and writing and talking with other women, and she was enrolled at Holyoke Community College because she had begun to see that she was the only one who could make her cozy cottage of the future a reality. Part of coming to value school differently involved reevaluating her relationship with Jose, and that is what "Life with an Addict" is about.

There are several things going on in the piece that are of interest: in the opening paragraph (which I will not read to you), she claims that Jose's drug addiction is her fault and she vows to help him get over it. It seems to me that when she makes his problem her problem, she is shifting her relationship to it and to him: she is no longer powerless but has repositioned herself in a way that allows her some kind of action, including perhaps walking away.

Another thing of interest is her use of pronouns: as she shifts from "I" in the first paragraph to "you" in the body of the paper, she is making herself part of a group of women in similar circumstances. I'm not at all sure she was conscious of the shift, but I hear this you as referring to a general situation, a community situation: this is what it's like for all who have experienced life with a drug addict. Again, she is repositioning herself by refusing to be alone with this tiresome and often frightening problem. In claiming community, she also claims power.

Finally, and most obvious, she realizes as she writes what a worthless bum Jose really is: this is no dream guy she wants to devote the rest of her life to, not unless she is ready to put up forever with the behavior and burdens she describes. Again, she is repositioning herself -- because she is the strong one, both physically and morally: she takes the trash out and she is "the father he is unable to be." She does it all, while he remains a helpless victim of his addiction. Not only her words but their tone of irony or sarcasm conveys the new meaning she is assigning to her experience of "love."

So -- here are a few paragraphs of her piece:

Life with a drug addict is very lonely. You spend most of your time away from one another. You do not choose to be away from each other, but he is dragged away by the calling of the drugs. You stay at home, struggling to do household chores, caring for the children and trying to make it to appointments on

time when you have no help at all. In fact, you even have the honor of doing his share of the work, like the heavy lifting and repairing anything that needs to be repaired. If you ask him to do something as simple as taking out the trash, and he has not had his fix, you will be the only one taking the trash out. You may as well not ask him to help do anything since you already know you will be doing it yourself. The most important thing left for you to do is be the father he is unable to be. Everything is left up to you, so that he can be on the street doing Lord-knows-what -- to get the fix he so desperately needs....

Having a lot of fear is part of life with a drug addict. You don't know what he does to get the drugs. One day you could go for a walk with him and the kids, and all of a sudden you hear someone shooting at you. You ask him if it had anything to do with him, and he tells you it was someone he had ripped off for a twenty-dollar bag of dope, or, worse, a ten-dollar cap.

After things like this happen, you start asking yourself if a life like this is worth sacrificing yours and your kids' for. And if this is true, why you would still stay with him. Maybe it's because you love him, or you feel it's your responsibility to stay; after all, you do feel it is your fault all of this is happening. At least these are my reasons.

Notice her shift back to first person in the last sentence, which to me affirms the significance of using second person in the rest of the paper. And notice those questions left hanging

in the air. It's as if the final sentences are a dutiful conclusion to the piece, but not by any means to the situation in her life.

Some may object that such writing has no place in an academic setting, but I would argue that in her "Life with an Addict" Marie is doing essential academic work. She is examining essential questions about what it means to be a woman, about relationships, psychology, and addiction. She is not "rolling about in herself" but doing some really hard work, work that has to be done -- and done, I think, in a school setting that will affirm the value of what she is saying -- before she can move on to topics and ways of putting words together that are more academically acceptable. She is, if you will, struggling to reshape herself in the spaces of a social discourse that had taught her what a female ought to be and ought to do with her life.

Writing doesn't make it so, that's for sure. But writing is a way of practicing what might be, a way of discovering how to resist apparently irresistible prescriptions, a way of rehearsing new subject positions. This kind of expressive writing must have, I believe, a place in the classroom if we mean to be about the business of undoing oppression. It is a difficult and dangerous business, because it may require undermining the very ground on which we stand. Students will not point an accusing finger at teachers, as Bill did, unless we are ready to admit that such an action is often justified. Students will not

challenge traditional constructs of femininity -- or of class and ethnic positionings -- unless we are ready to admit that our definitions of what and how to learn have themselves been instruments of exclusion and oppression. I feel it is part of our work to help students discover the possibility of challenge and resistance and to provide the community in which the search for alternative discourses becomes a supported collaborative venture, in which their complex of self and selves can be explored and assessed and ultimately perhaps reshaped.

Useful readings:

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